



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Florida Panther *Update*

## Field Stories

January 2012

With the 2011 holiday season behind us, and all of the appetizing indulgences now fading in our memories, it seems fitting for this issue to discuss December feeding behaviors of two Florida panthers: FP183 and FP194.

### FP183: Preying for More Daylight

On December 7 panther biologist Mark Lotz cautiously bounced a swamp buggy over old limestone dappled roads in Picayune Strand State Forest. Around him were reminders of the ongoing restoration: excavating machines both moving and parked; logs and stumps in massive piles, some slowly burning with rising thin columns of smoke. And at one journey point, in a more remote area alongside a crude road, there appeared a reminder of the Florida panther: a scrape stamped in the center with a paw print.

As he drove, Mark was hoping to fit in a visit to two Florida panther GPS data cluster sites before sundown. Cluster sites are areas where a collared (FP183 has a GPS GSM collar) panther's location data showed the cat to be near the same location over a period of hours or days, indicating the panther had settled for a while. When this happens it can mean the panther is resting, mating, denning (in the case of a female) or feeding on a recent kill. When the location data shows the panther has traveled on from the area, it is safe to visit. Mark was tasked with investigating two of these sites that week to document evidence of the panther's activities as part of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) prey study. Some cluster locations are easy to get to and others more of a challenge. These were going to be a challenge. FP183 was hanging out in a very remote part of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park adjacent to the forest.

Cross referencing the cluster data map, a GPS navigator loaded with the coordinates of the first site, and an aerial map, Mark steered the buggy off the road, skirting cabbage palms (a few with tops smashed by Florida black bears foraging for hearts of palm) until he found a watery trail, almost like a canal, winding through a picturesque cypress swamp. It was almost 3:30 PM and Mark knew chances were getting slimmer for investigating both sites before dark. His day began at 6:30 AM because it was more than a week into the FWC's panther capture season. That morning Roy McBride's hounds had treed a female. She was left uncollared because conditions were not determined to be safe enough. Since capture work was taking place in the mornings, the weekly investigation of two prey sites took place in the afternoon.

Halting the buggy at approximately 500 feet from the coordinates, Mark led the way, boots splashing through knee-high crystal clear water to the area very recently occupied by FP183. He documented three daybeds (panther resting places), verified by panther hairs and footprints. And he scanned and sniffed the area, searching for tell-tale signs of a prey carcass such as bones, an odor, or a vulture. Once a panther finishes with a carcass, it is left uncovered. Vultures often complete the job and can cause remaining evidence to be scattered and hard to find. A pile of feathers indicated that something had taken a grey catbird in the area. It was most likely a Cooper's hawk. Ultimately, no large prey carcass was discovered. And Mark didn't make it to the second site either. He'd have to drive all the way back in the next day. It seems "preyers" aren't always answered.



**Upper:** Picking through the flattened leaves and tramped soil of a panther daybed to find hairs or paw prints for verification.

**Lower:** A white hair from FP183's belly: hard (soft) evidence of a bed site. USFWS Photos

**Florida Panthers** hunt at dawn and dusk. They rush short distances and spring at their prey. They kill by a bite to the neck or skull. An adult male typically consumes larger-sized prey (e.g., white-tailed deer) every 8 to 11 days, while an adult female with kittens may consume more. After eating, panthers "cache" their prey by putting debris over the carcass. Panthers may return to feed on the same carcass over several days.

Currently the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is engaged in a prey study under the direction of Dr. Dave Onorato. Watch for Dave's article with more specifics on the study in the February Panther Update issue.

### FP194: Eat Right, Stay Out of Fights and Don't Play in the Street.

On November 29, 2011, fifteen-month-old male FP194 was released back into the wilds of Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP)

[www.floridapanther.net.org/images/field\\_notes/Update\\_1211\\_Final.pdf](http://www.floridapanther.net.org/images/field_notes/Update_1211_Final.pdf). It was a positive event for all involved with the rescue and raising of this cat. The BCNP panther team could not rest

easy, however. There were still three major questions concerning the well-being of this cat. Will he avoid roads or be able to cross them safely? Will he be able to defend himself in conflicts with other panthers? And, most importantly, will he be able to successfully kill prey? Around two weeks after the release, on December 11, the third question would be answered.

In the midmorning sun, Deborah Jansen, BCNP biologist, waded through knee high cypress slough waters, checking her direction with a GPS navigator which contained coordinates (based on cluster data) of the potential FP194 prey site. When the terrain opened into wet prairie, black vultures pointed the way. One flew overhead while the other perched in a tree. Stopping short of the GPS coordinates she raised a receiver antenna, listening for FP193's radio signals, to assure he had not returned to the area. Minutes later the first evidence of his kill was discovered: the lower leg of a white-tailed deer, complete with dewclaws and hoof. After a little more searching she discovered the kill site with additional lower leg bones, sections of lower jaw, a piece of rib, scattered tufts of deer hair and the ruminant stomach, still buried. When a panther feeds on its kill he first uses his rough tongue and incisors to remove fur or feathers from the prey animal. Typically the panther will start by entering the body cavity. He removes and buries the stomach, and eats the vital organs, particularly the heart and liver. The ribs are often chewed off, sometimes to near the backbone. Next, he will begin on the thigh muscles. Panthers will eat bone and do bite into bones for the marrow.

Deborah reasoned FP193's prize to be a young deer, not quite a year old, possibly eight months because the lower jaw still contained the baby premolars. It was now clear FP194 could feed himself in the wild. A second prey investigation on December 20 at a nearby site confirmed it again, yielding a deer skull, four lower legs, the pelvic girdle and a bit of the vertebrae. FP194 had been dining on his second kill from December 15 to 19. As of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, he has moved a straight-line distance of over sixteen miles from the release site and is going in a good direction as far as prime panther habitat in Big Cypress.



*Leftovers from FP194's feast. Studying the molars of the white-tailed deer can yield clues to its age. USFWS Photo*



## Notices and Links

**On January 17, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Initiative will kick off a 1000 mile expedition** over a 100 day period to increase public awareness and generate support for the Florida Wildlife Corridor project. One of the many Florida Wildlife Corridor goals is to protect and restore dispersal and migration corridors essential for the survival of Florida's diverse wildlife, including the wide-ranging Florida panther. The team will document the corridor through photography, video streams, radio reports, daily updates on social media and digital networks. During their journey they'll be traversing through areas utilized by panthers as home ranges such as Big Cypress and Everglades National Parks, Ok Slough, and the Florida Panther National Wildlife refuge. Award-winning cinematographer Elam Stoltzfus will document the expedition to produce a film about the journey and the Florida Wildlife Corridor. [www.floridawildlifecorridor.org](http://www.floridawildlifecorridor.org)

On December 13, the **Hendry County Board of County Commissioners voted in favor of designating 5.25 miles of CR 832/Keri Road as a slow speed nighttime panther zone.** Elizabeth Fleming, Florida Representative for Defenders of Wildlife, authored a blog regarding new nighttime slower speed zone on Keri Road in Okaloacoochee Slough to help protect panthers from vehicle collisions. Coincidentally she also experienced her first panther sighting on that day. [www.defendersblog.org/2011/12/florida-panther-sighting-heralds-slow-zone-designation](http://www.defendersblog.org/2011/12/florida-panther-sighting-heralds-slow-zone-designation)

On December 27, Naples Daily News Published "**Domestic Animal Services: Panther Killed Horse Found Dead on Christmas Day**" by Kristine Gill. [www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/dec/27/das-panther-killed-horse-found-dead-christmas-day](http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/dec/27/das-panther-killed-horse-found-dead-christmas-day)

On December 28, the Public News Service (FL) posted an article by Glen Gardner entitled, "**Looking for Ways Panthers and Ranchers Can Coexist in Florida**". [www.publicnewsservice.org/index.php?/content/article/23989-1](http://www.publicnewsservice.org/index.php?/content/article/23989-1)

**Florida Panther Update Partnership** This newsletter is made possible through the efforts of the following agencies:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) [www.floridapanther.net/org](http://www.floridapanther.net/org)

Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) [www.nps.gov/bicy](http://www.nps.gov/bicy)

Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) [www.fws.gov/floridapanther](http://www.fws.gov/floridapanther)



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